

AN APOLOGIA FOR THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE

I begin these reflections on the intellectual life with a quote from THE REVISED GENERAL PROGRAM OF FORMATION that highlights the importance for our life and mission of study and the intellectual life:

"No. 41 Formation for Passionist mission also means preparation and training to proclaim the Word of the Cross in the most effective way possible so as to touch the lives of all who are in need. The traditional means of communicating the Word of the Cross in Church assemblies and through the printed media no longer reach a huge proportion of people, particularly the young. Part of our response must be a specialized formation in all areas related to communication. This is more urgent today than ever before given the predominance of the electronic and digital media. Every society is changing at an accelerating pace with ever new pressures on people. There are new challenges in articulating and sharing the faith in a credible and attractive manner. The growth of indifference and hostility to faith and religion in many societies makes it imperative to find effective ways of responding. Evangelization today includes a deep concern for the poor and for the future of the planet. For these reasons, more of our young people are to be encouraged to study secular sciences like sociology, psychology, economics, ecology, politics as essential to a fuller understanding of our world and the trends that are shaping the future."

Passionists can be characterized in general as missionaries whose missionary work is nourished on the contemplation of God, and especially of Jesus in his passion. Passionists are practical men who are close to the people. They minister to God's people in retreats, popular missions and parishes by preaching the Word and celebrating the sacraments. Passionists are simple and holy priests and brothers. They are not scholars and academics. Unlike many other religious congregations, Passionists do not run internationally renowned centers of research and learning and do not have universities. This is the profile of the Passionists I was introduced to as a young man and my experienced of the Congregation since then has it borne it out.

It is not that the Congregation of the Passion is anti-intellectual in principle. I think the cautious attitude to the intellectual life has more to do with the particular details of our beginnings and history than anything else. In 18th century Europe, the centers of intellectual life were far away from Italy in Scotland, France and Germany. It was in these countries that new ideas were spreading. There was new science with Newton, new economics with Adam Smith, new politics with Jean Jacques Rousseau, new philosophy with David Hume and Immanuel Kant, new theology with the Deists, and new music with Mozart and others. It was a time when

a host of intellectual luminaries were offering new ways of understanding every aspect of reality and human life. The great intellectual ferment of the time was far away from Italy in the North.

The Italian peninsula in the 18th century was dominated politically by Austria and Spain and was largely untouched by the new intellectual trends sweeping through northern Europe. The Catholics of the Italian peninsula were protected from these new, dangerous and mostly Protestant ideas. The Church was busy trying to keep the peace between the Catholic empires and at the same time sought new ways to cultivate the faith and devotional life of the people. This is something like the general background to the birth of the Passionists and the approval of the Popes given to the Passionists and other similar congregations to preach popular missions in the mid-18th century.

The few notable Catholic intellectuals of the 19th century were either under suspicion like Cardinal Newman or condemned as liberals like de Lamennais or Modernists like George Tyrrell. The encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of Leo XIII was an attempt to promote the intellectual life of the Church and above all to defend the Church and the Catholic faith against the dangerous new thinking of the time. It was in this intellectual climate that the Passionists were growing and spreading.

For much of the 19th and 20th century, intellectuals in the Catholic Church were suspect. Many were condemned, silenced and forbidden to teach or publish. At that time, it was better to be a simple, pious priest than to read dangerous books. Intellectuals are still often caricatured as having their heads in the clouds and being of little practical use. The Passionists seem to have imbibed this suspicion of the intellectual life, and that may explain why we have few serious scholars and academics among us. There are, of course, some outstanding exceptions.

The situation in the Church has changed dramatically. The Catholic Church was blessed with a great number of internationally recognized scholars and innovative thinkers in the second half of the 20th century. The Second Vatican Council was helped greatly by the scholarship and insights of great thinkers like Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Edward Schillebeeckx, Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner to name but a few. These and others like them inspired a new thirst for theology, philosophy, the history of the Church and biblical research all of which continue to enrich the life and mission of the Church.

Catholics today are working alongside men and women of other faiths and none. Some of these are experts in their fields and many are seekers who want to understand our faith and have penetrating questions that require equally penetrating answers. Many Catholic lay people are highly educated and long for a faith that is illuminated by reason. They are no longer happy with a version of faith that is disconnected from every other part of their adult lives. They don't want to park their faith in an isolated non-rational corner of their lives. They want to relate

their faith to the new developments in science and to the many pressing social and political issues of the day. Educated Catholics want to be able to draw on their faith as a positive resource for a fuller and more human life.

The mission of the Church today is not confined to maintaining the faith of simple, uneducated people in Europe and North America. The Catholic Church wants to encounter the whole world and share the Good News with all people. The particular challenge in Europe and in Western countries in general is the shift from the confessional state to the secular, liberal democratic state. Religion is no longer supported by the state and upheld by law. As long as that was the situation, the Church was guaranteed an important role in society and in people's lives. Now the Church has to persuade the people and win their support by the credibility of its witness. Part of the credibility is the intellectual substance of its teaching and its ability to give convincing reasons for its beliefs and moral teaching. It is no longer possible to demand obedience without reason. When the Church encounters new people and new cultures it wants to share its message with reason and respect. This is an important way of showing respect for others. Reason in this context does not mean reducing the faith to a rational system of philosophy. It does mean, however, that the faith cannot simply be imposed on docile people under pain of sanction or eternal damnation.

This new context calls for an educated clergy that is trained to hear the questions of the people and is ready to help find those answers that respect the mystery of faith while seeking to illuminate it with reason. In this way the Church is being faithful to one of the most ancient traditions of the Christian community that respects the dialogue between faith and reason, *fides quaerens intellectum*. On the other hand, faith divorced from reason runs the risk of descending into forms of irrational fanaticism and intolerance. Unfortunately, there is evidence that this is happening in some parts of the Church today.

The Church inherited from the ancient Greeks a deep respect for the human intellect as the "faculty of the divine". Every human being has been made in the image of God and given a natural desire for God. This natural desire stirs most fully within the human intellect that longs to know God and experience union with God. The human intellect is oriented towards God and the nourishment of the intellect nourishes also this natural desire for God. Human beings achieve their natural fulfillment when they nurture the intellect and allow the natural desire for God to grow and deepen. According to the great mystics of the desert, prayer and contemplation is the activity of *nous* or intellect. Intellect points in the direction of God but it is the gift of faith and the message of Jesus that gives us the fuller knowledge of God our Father and his great love for each one of us.

All the great teachers and Fathers of the Church were recognized as "philosophers", holy men who prayed and thought hard about the mysteries of the



Christian faith. It was this combination of serious prayer and serious study that enabled the Church to flourish despite the many challenges from every direction. We think of Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, Jerome, Anselm, Aquinas and the numberless others who prayed, thought deeply, and preached eloquently. It was because of the combination of faith and reason that the Church flourished and the faith grew, spread and enlightened the peoples of the ancient world and since.

This brief survey of some aspects of the intellectual tradition of the Church is intended to awaken a new awareness of the intellectual life as an essential part of every missionary's life. Because of a history of indifference to the intellectual life it will take time to awaken from our anti-intellectual slumber. However, we are all deeply aware that the Church today needs to find a new language for communicating the faith in a way that is credible and convincing. The most significant language is always the witness of good and holy men and women who are dedicated to the service of God's people. It will also demand a serious commitment to the study of philosophy, theology and the other sciences that define and stamp the times in which we live. We cannot claim to be experts in the Word of God if we are deaf to the questions and concerns of people around us.

I conclude these remarks with another quote from the *Revised General Program of Formation* that reminds us of the need to identify young religious with an aptitude for post-graduate studies. This is essential for the life of the Congregation within the Church, and to maintain a minimum level of critical thinking and reflection that will enrich our community life and our ability to respond to the demands of a changing church and world. :

43. We should keep a vigilant eye on the academic resources of the Congregation so that we have a sufficient number of qualified people in the different branches of ecclesiastical and secular sciences to maintain a healthy level of intellectual and cultural life in the Congregation. In recent years the majority of post-graduate students have been in spirituality and canon law. The life and mission of the Congregation will benefit from the contributions of biblical scholars, systematic theologians, philosophers as well as people qualified in the secular sciences. Other important areas of specialization are administration and the acquisition of additional skills regarding the maintenance of the goods of the community.

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